

Are local action groups, under LEADER approach, a good way to support resilience in rural areas?



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Abstract: The LEADER approach is a tool of governance in rural areas in Spain since its launch as a Community initiative, more than two decades ago. Its contribution to the development of rural areas, and their adaptation to the changes that have occurred in the last twenty years, are decisive. For local action groups (LAGs), the existence of networks that grouped them, is essential for the development of the methodology, the transmission of information and the relationship with governments, at regional, national and European level. Both, LAGs and networks can play an important role to analyze the effects of the economic crisis in rural areas and the capacity of resilience. This paper analyzes the role of LAGs and the existing rural development networks in Spain, their functioning, how LAGs adapt themselves to the crisis, how they are supported by the mentioned networks, and how they can contribute to the resilience in rural areas.

Keywords: resilience, LEADER, local action group (LAG), rural networks.

¿Son los grupos de acción local, bajo enfoque LEADER, una buena vía para contribuir a la resiliencia en las zonas rurales?

Resumen: El enfoque LEADER es una herramienta de gobernanza que se viene utilizando en España desde su puesta en marcha como iniciativa comunitaria, hace más de dos décadas. Su contribución al desarrollo de los territorios rurales y su adaptación a los cambios sucedidos en los últimos veinte años, son decisivas. Para los grupos de acción local (GAL), la existencia de las redes es esencial para el desarrollo de la metodología, la transmisión de información y la relación con las administraciones a nivel regional, nacional y europeo. Tanto los GAL como las Redes pueden jugar un importante papel a la hora de analizar los efectos de la crisis económica en las áreas rurales y la capacidad de resiliencia de las mismas. El presente artículo analiza el papel de los GAL y de las redes de desarrollo rural en España, su funcionamiento, cómo se han adaptado los GAL a la crisis, qué apoyo han recibido de las redes y cómo pueden contribuir a la resiliencia de las zonas rurales.

Palabras clave: resiliencia, LEADER, grupo de acción local (GAL), redes de desarrollo rural.

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Introduction

Society currently finds itself immersed in a socio-economic and environmental crisis, affecting all activities in which humans are involved. However, it is in those systems with the least ability to overcome these changes where this situation can start to threaten its stability. The environment, as a socio-economic system, has suffered huge changes in the last century. However, as Rubio (2010) states, "the socio-economic and cultural changes that have taken place at the start of the 90s, in a context of socio-economic prosperity and the behaviour of such a consumer society, have formed the basis for the emergence of a rural environment that is very different from what might be traditionally expected".

The rural environment is a live and dynamic system, characterised by the presence of numerous social, cultural, economic and environmental links (Larrubia and Navarro, 2011; Kovács, 2001). However, this also presents a significant vulnerability due to the socioeconomic valuation loss (Kovács, 2008), and abandonment and decline in population, which have weakened mutual support networks in the rural environment (family, neighbourhood...), and have made their local economies extremely dependant on constant flows of capital and energy.

Although there is a lot of data and information regarding these flows, there are many determining interactions for each system, which are currently difficult to measure.

These include both internal, as well as external interactions (between other systems linked to the rural environment). Terry (2012), states that the configuration of a community requires three universal factors: (1) a sense of belonging, (2) resources, and (3) a demarcated territory. Although the rural environment has had these three aforementioned factors, the various migration situations, industrialisation, and the return of inhabitants who are unfamiliar with rural dynamics have led to the sense of belonging being reduced, or even disappearing altogether in some rural areas in Spain (Sáez *et al.*, 2001).

The rural environment consists of a social system, resulting from all of the adaptations that the different communities have carried out in order to overcome the various challenges (some of which have been very traumatic) they have faced throughout their development process (Adger, 2000; Walker *et al.*, 2004). Similarly, the rural system will never be able to consider itself as a static system, rather it has to remain in a dynamic state. This should be seen as a necessary natural process in order to survive.

The survival of complex systems, such as the rural environment, is highly linked to not only the challenges they face, but also their ability to overcome these. This characteristic was put forward by Holling (1973) and is linked to ecology as a form of resilience, even though it took a while for it to be accepted by the rest of the scientific community. It is precisely the ability to resolve the situation that has arisen in order to avoid a collapse, which makes a system an important part of its longevity, enabling a return to the original situation, and the ability to learn and evolve in a dynamic context.

For Règebeau and Rockett (2013), resilience refers to "the recovery of a system from shocks, whereas sustainability refers to maintaining current opportunities into the long run future". However, traditionally the concept of resilience is usually understood as something that is highly linked to the term sustainability, and its 3 dimensions: (1) the population's self-sufficiency when it comes to developing products and services that are required in order for the community to survive; (2) the relationship with the environment, energy consumption and production, and contamination; and (3) the civic compromise and socio-political environment, creating greater opportunities for participation (Règebeau and Rockett, 2013). From this point, resilience will be an invaluable quality amongst those rural communities looking to survive, with a preference for "transition" projects (Latouche, 2007).

In words of Magis, "Community resilience is the existence, development and engagement of community resources to thrive in a dynamic environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability and surprise. Resilient communities

intentionally develop personal and collective capacity to respond to and influence change, to sustain and renew the community and to develop new trajectories for the community's future" (Magis, 2007: 10).

It is precisely on the system's social scale where these relationships between the different agents that make up the rural territory are particularly important in terms of its cohesion (Granovetter, 1973; Woolcock, 1998). In order to confront some of the threats to the resilience in the rural areas, 5 key elements need to be considered: (1) social break-up, (2) depopulation, (3) external territorial policies that affect other areas, (4) the conservation of the natural and physical environment, and (5) the reduced diversification of the economy (Ambrosio *et al.*, 2007).

As explained by Règibeau and Rockett (2013) and Ambrosio (2007), the concepts of sustainability and resilience have various similarities. Amongst these common areas are the relationship with the environment and its conservation; the relationship society has with production and the diversity of the economy; and the existence of a civic agreement, and the creation of social structures and participative processes.

In this context, the existence of support networks has enabled the communities to progress despite social and environmental challenges, overcoming and adapting to new conditions (Wilding, 2011). However, it should not necessarily just be the community that should overcome these internal and external challenges. Companies and administrations can also facilitate a positive response to such changes in conditions. It is in this space where the concept of governance becomes necessary, not only in terms of governing, but also for dealing with any breakdowns in formal and informal relationships, with or without the administration (Stoker, 1998); focusing on adaptive governance, as well the ability to create dynamic mechanisms in order to adequately manage any internal resilience (Lebel *et al.* 2006; Ambrosio *et al.*, 2007).

The analysis of resilience in the rural environment is complex due to the multiple elements and relationships that surround it. However, in the European context, there are social structures that include both the various local administrations as well as civil and economic society. As Buciega (2012) states, "in order to generate social capital and transform this into collective action [...] a number of external conditions and support need to be present in order to encourage its consolidation". From this perspective, we are introduced to the concept of Local Action Groups (LAGs), which in Spain, since their introduction by the LEADER initiative in 1991 work to unite the rural environments, integrating the local community, grouping both public and private interests and covering the vast majority of the rural territory and population (Red Rural Nacional, 2011; Moyano, 2005).

From the start, LAGs have carried out activities closely linked to the communities in which they operate, providing economic support for various initiatives in rural territories; and fostering a cohesive and understanding dynamic amongst the population (Esparcia *et al.*, 2000; García *et al.*, 2005; Esparcia and Escribano, 2012; Buciega and Esparcia, 2013). From this perspective, the LAGs can be considered as representative entities for the rural society, capable of promoting resilience and enabling these communities to overcome the challenges being faced.

Furthermore, it is interesting to consider the LAGs as privileged witnesses of the effects that the crisis has on the territory in which they operate. This contributes to resilience in the rural environment and allows them to adapt, both in terms of structure and operationally.

The LAGs have a prominent local presence, but at a regional level they are organised into Rural Development Networks. These networks promote mutual knowledge sharing and learning, with a common ground for solving problems. Due to this unifying role that the LAGs play, it is also necessary to understand how the networks have confronted the change processes that have been experienced over the last few years, with an emphasis on how these networks have been able to guarantee the LAGs' activities, whilst having to make up for their lack of ability to take action.

Objectives and methodology

This paper will analyse the role of LAGs in Spain, in decision making for rural development, its perception on the effects of the recent economic crisis on the Spanish rural environment, how it has adapted internally to the crisis, and its support role in the resilience of rural territories.

We have moved away from considering the LAGs as useful tools for analysing the rural environment's ability to be resilient by their presence in rural areas (in some cases these are sparsely populated areas and the LAG is the only active entity, apart from the provision of the most basic services, which usually comes down to provincial communities and councils), due to their structure (the main actors in the rural environment participate in the LAGs), and because of their knowledge of the situation being faced in the rural environment, based on their experiences since 1991 in terms of

economic activity, potential employment gaps, social problems or environmental needs in the territories.

Based on the aforementioned five key elements for confronting the challenges being faced by the rural environment (Ambrosio *et al.*, 2007), the LAGs can provide resilience, directly or indirectly, influencing social break-up, external territorial policies that affect a territory that is not involved in their creation (the opposite of what the LAGs represent, applying the LEADER methodology), and on the reduced diversification of the economy, depopulation and the conservation of the natural and physical environment.

There are 264 Local Action Groups in Spain formed between 2007 and 2013 that are still active, due to rule n+2 (Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino, 2011); spread across the Autonomous Communities.

In order to extract the necessary information, a survey has been created which has been distributed by all the LAGs through the Rural Development Networks which they are part of: The Spanish Network for Rural Development and the State Network for Rural Development¹. The survey was targeted at the LAG managers, who are responsible for promoting links and generating trust in the LAGs (Buciega and Esparcia, 2013), and for the day to day management of the groups. They are also more aware of the situations being faced in the rural environment than the presidents – who play a more representative or political role –.

The survey is divided into three parts. The first of these focuses on the period of the European Rural Development Programming 2007–2013, with a special emphasis on the development strategy and decisions on which projects to finance on behalf of the LAGs, the role of the administration and the level of freedom that the groups have had, with a particular focus on the effects of the economic crisis, resilience and the role that the LAGs have played on mitigating the effects of said crisis.

The second part is focused on the operation and internal workings of the LAG, in defining the territory and projects. The third and final part is focused on the period between 2014–2020, analysing the involvement in the programming phase for this period, its role in decision making and the forecast of the future situation of the rural environment, once it has overcome the economic crisis.

1• It is important to take into account that these two networks are different from the National Rural Network, foreseen in the Council Regulation (EC) 1698/2005, of 20 September 2005, on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), article 68.

To complement this, and as a result of the importance of the role of the regional networks (which the groups belong to), a specific survey has been developed on this issue. These networks form part of the aforementioned two national networks. The survey was targeted at the managers of regional networks. It is formed of the same three sections but focusses on the relationship between the LAGs and the networks, and the role of these in supporting the work of the others, in particular for resilience against a crisis.

Both surveys have been elaborated, taking into account the three mentioned parts in which them, have been divided, and considering the main aspects of the activity and functioning of LAGS and networks. After that, and before being sent to the LAGs and regional networks, the surveys have been tested with the two managers of the Rural Development Networks at national level.

To elaborate the questions, the first step have been to analyse the main elements that could be answered with "yes, no, or do not answer", in each of the above mentioned parts. In a second phase, a Likert scale has been applied in all cases it has been possible, in order to expand the answers. Finally, more detailed information has been obtained through open questions.

Both surveys are anonymous, and the possibility of additional comments has been considered to provide more elements for the discussion.

The first of these surveys was answered by 65 LAGs, which represents 25% of the total.

The survey targeted at Rural Development Networks was answered by nine regional networks, seven of which belong to the Spanish Rural Development Network, and two to the State Rural Development Network. Given that the first of these has 14 regional networks or organisations and the second has four, the percentage of responses reached 64% in total.

All of the information obtained in the surveys has been processed and analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Following this, the information has been structured into three main blocks of questions, based on the objectives, which will now be analysed.

Analysis and discussion of results

In order to achieve the stated objectives, the analysis is organised into three blocks of basic questions:

Block 1: How do the LAGs operate day-to-day and with regards to decision making? As stated by Ambrosio, is the territory not involved in creating policies that affect them, or is the involvement of the actors in the rural environment steered by the LAGs in a "bottom-up" approach?

Firstly, it is important to remember that the LAGs are structures that have to operate under the agreed LEADER focus -"bottom-up" approach-. As a result, in the policies managed by the LAGs, it is the inhabitants and actors from across the territory who decide the development model through which investment strategies and projects are applied. However, in practice; Is it the role of the LAGs?

In answer to the question on the relationship between public and private sectors in the GAL Assembly, (over 95% of the LAGs are associations, and less than 5% are consortiums), 12% responded that it is predominantly private (45% said private, 41% said that there is a balance between public and private parties). However, when asked about decision making, these percentages varied, increasing the importance of the public sector, with 18% believing that the weight of the Public Administration is higher than the private sector when it comes to decision making.

Looking at the responses from the surveys in the period between 2007-2013, 60% of the LAGs believe that when they are formulating their territorial strategies, the groups have had significant (or even total) freedom. However, 68% believe that there have been limitations or interferences by the administration, either all the time or on certain occasions.

Nevertheless, the public administration is perceived as supporting the complex work of the groups with regards to their strategy. That is what 63% of the LAGs think. 31% believe that they have always had the support of the public administration. However, this support is considered inadequate by 52% of the groups, compared to 26% who say it is adequate.

Furthermore, 58% of the LAGs have been able to rely on external support when it came to creating territorial strategies for 2007-2013. For 14%, this external support has consisted of general help, creating strategies or in the preliminary phases. In 5% of cases, this has been limited to the diagnosis of the territory and the economic sectors within it, and the suitability of the strategy for the territory (it relates to very specific and distinct work in each group, due to the huge differences across the rural environment in Spain).

On the other hand, 17% have received external support for technical matters, consulting or support, during one of the strategy development phases of the process. Of particular interest is the fact that only 6% of the groups have received support for encouraging involvement amongst the population during the development of strategies, in line with the basic principles of the LEADER methodology.

This external support has been mostly provided by consultancy firms or university experts (43%). In contrast, only 9% of the LAGs have received support from social agents from within the territory.

A relevant factor for verifying the use of a "bottom-up" approach is the involvement of the population. Interestingly, although in 70% of groups there has been involvement amongst the population with regards to formulating strategy, only in 15% of cases has this involvement been seen as adequate.

The LEADER methodology, which has been applied to the territorial strategies by the LAGs, is included in the rural development programmes. In the case of Spain, the competence corresponds to the Autonomous Communities who act as management authorities and payment bodies (Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación, 2007). It is therefore interesting to understand the coordinating role that the regional administrations have throughout the programme, given that a large part of whether the LAG's rural development strategies function properly depends on it. Once again, we see that for 25% of the LAGs the balance of coordination from the regional Administration is very negative, and for 40% it is negative. In total, two thirds believe that the Administration has not done enough in terms of its coordinator role, and only 20% believe that the balance is positive or highly positive.

Another relevant aspect for analysing the role of the groups when it comes to resilience are the projects that are implemented (from a social, economic and environmental point of view, as defined by Règebeau and Rockett, 2013). When asked about this, with the answers following a Likert scale (with 1 being all the projects, unproductive, and 5 being all the projects, productive), an average of 3.5 was recorded, with a majority of responses scoring 4 (39) and none scoring 1 (not productive). This

suggests that in the majority of cases, projects financed by the LAGs have been productive, thus, in theory, having a positive economic impact.

In order for all these projects led by the groups to try to contribute to resilience, they should all be well defined and be useful for those people at which they are aimed. In this case, nine out of ten LAGs believe that the majority of projects have been properly defined.

In terms of usefulness, 94% positively value its usefulness, 78% of which from an economic perspective. In addition, 77% state that the project's usefulness lies in its ability to generate employment. Social and environmental utilities also feature to some extent (69% and 42% of LAGs, respectively). Two thirds of LAGs believe that projects have been useful for the rural community as a whole. Furthermore, about 40% of LAGs believe that they have been useful for private, and the same amount for public interests.

Another interesting aspect is the level of freedom with regards to financing the projects. In a question on whether political interests have been favoured or just territorial interests, three out of four LAGs believe that territorial interests are favoured, compared to one out of ten who believe that political interests have been favoured (figure that, although small, contradicts the LEADER methodology, in which territorial development strategies and projects to be financed should be decided based on the territory's needs and never purely on a political basis).

With regards to the definition of projects, 57% of LAGs defined them in their strategy, whilst in four out of ten the directorates were given leeway to define these. In cases where political interests are favoured, this can lead to projects being approved that have criteria that are different to the territory's requirement. Although LAGs should have a significant freedom when designing and implementing strategies (Esparcia and Escribano, 2102), even in those cases in which projects were defined in the strategy, there is also a risk that political interests are favoured, given that 68% of LAGs believe that there have been limitations or interferences from the administration when it comes to defining strategy.

In that sense, during the period between 2007-2013, when asked whether the administration influenced the definition of projects, 54% of LAGs said "yes" (12% saying always), compared to 46% who said there was no influence. Yet again, taking into account what the principles of the LEADER approach are, this is another element to consider in terms of the LAGs ability to carry out its task and try to help improving the resilience.

In contrast, and from the point of views of the regional rural networks, three out of four believe that territorial characteristics have been favoured when it comes

to defining projects. None of the regional networks responded that political interests had been favoured, when in the case of the LAGs that were surveyed, 9% thought so. Almost all of the networks believe that the projects were defined by the strategy. Only one network believes that there was leeway for the board of directors. Where there does seem to be more agreement is with regards to the influence of the Administration (almost eight out of ten of networks said this was the case, whilst the rest disagreed).

To complete the block, it is also worth focusing on the involvement of the LAGs and the networks in the preparations for the period between 2014 and 2020.

With regards to the participation of the LAGs in the definition of the new programming period, 55% responded not to have been asked during the consultancy process to elaborate the regional rural development programmes. Only 9% of the LAGs consider that have been involved in the rural development policy planning at regional level.

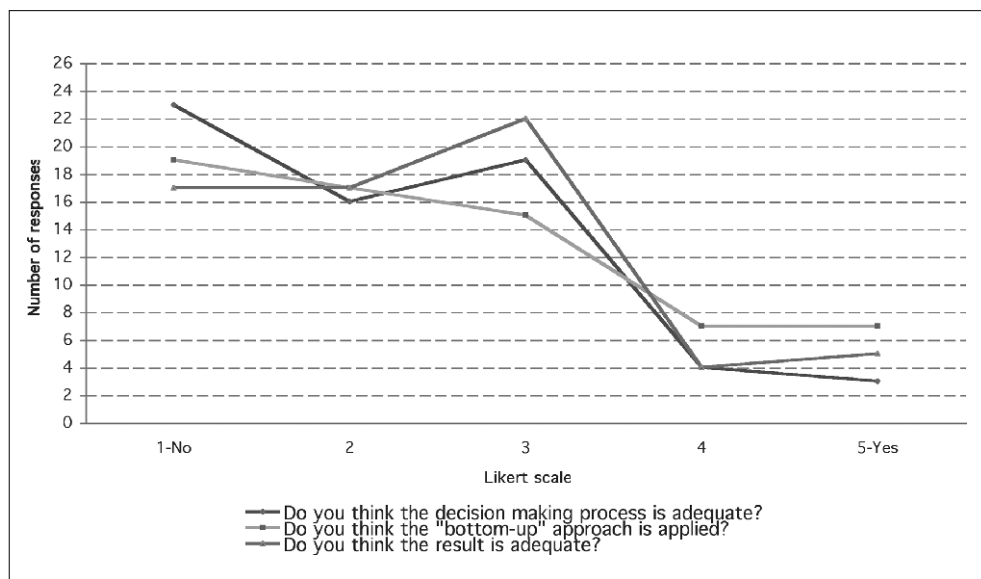
Furthermore, 81% of the LAGs responded that their proposals for the regional rural development programmes 2014-2020 are being taking into account "nothing" (60%) or "almost nothing" (21%).

When asked if they believe the decision making process during this period was adequate, 60% of LAGs replied no, and only 11% replied yes. The LAGs that believe the decision making process was inadequate think that there is a lack of involvement from civil society, there is excessive presence from powerful groups dominated by political interests (as also stated by Esparcia *et al.*, 2000), there are no opportunities for groups to be involved in the process, a top-down focus is applied for decision making or that the LAGs are not as prominent as they should be.

A similar percentage is seen for the LAGs that believe that there is not a "bottom-up" approach (a bit more of half of the respondents). However, 21% do believe there is this focus. With regards to the results obtained following the decision making (in whichever manner), 52% believe that it is not adequate, whilst 14% believe that an adequate result is achieved, percentages similar to those seen for decision making.

These similarities seem to indicate that when the decision making process is not adequate, a "bottom-up" approach is not applied and the results obtained are inadequate, as shown in Figure 1. This suggests that when the LEADER methodology is not applied, the LAGs have difficulty in achieving suitable results, and as a result difficulty in effectively supporting the rural environment with resilience.

Figure 1.
Responses from the LAGs survey related to the decision making process



Source: LAGs survey, 2014

To conclude the analysis on the preparation of the period between 2014-2020, the LAGs were asked if they have any leeway for developing territorial strategies. 62% of the LAGs replied that they have little or no freedom (15% said none at all). Only 18% of the LAGs have enough flexibility (only one LAG responded that they had total freedom) when it comes to implementing territorial strategies.

With regards to the regional networks, two thirds believe the decision making process is inadequate, four out of five believe there isn't a "bottom-up" approach and half of them believe that the results are inadequate. All these percentages are higher than the LAG scores for the same questions. This could mean that the networks are just more critical by nature when it comes to using the LEADER methodology, or that there is a greater distance from the reality and day-to-day activity that the LAGs carry out.

Second block: Have the groups been capable of adapting to the changes that have taken place in the rural environment over recent years? Have they had help with this?

In order to contextualise and analyse this second block, it is important to understand how the economic crisis has been perceived in the rural environment and how this has played out. In this respect, and as mentioned in the methodology and objectives sections, the LAGs can be used as privileged "witnesses" of the impact that the crisis has had on the rural environment. Their perception of the term "crisis" is varied.

The majority of responses highlight high levels of unemployment, an increase in this level, or lack of employment prospects (23% of LAGs mention this), a loss of basic services, reduction in public services, healthcare, education cutbacks or a deterioration in the standard of living (mentioned by 20% of LAGs), decrease in economic activity, recession, lack of competitiveness, lack of opportunities to learn and firms closing down (20% of LAGs), difficulties in securing financing (mentioned by 11% of LAGs), depopulation, emigration, ageing population (9% of LAGs). These responses put the emphasis of the crisis on social and economic aspects, and on the key to overcoming social break down and depopulation, two of the threats to resilience (Ambrosio *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, it also emphasises the economic dimension, rather than just the reduced diversification in the economy.

Only four LAGs (6%) showed glimmers of optimism in terms of the crisis: "opportunity to develop", "generating self-employment", "interest in agriculture" and "re-invigoration of agriculture". Based on these last two responses, it seems that the crisis in some territories can strengthen the weight of the agricultural sector compared to other economic sectors in the rural environment, reducing even more the diversification of the economy in these rural areas. This has been considered one of the key elements to take into consideration when trying to overcome the threat to resilience in the rural environment.

When asked how the crisis has manifested in the rural environment, 83% believe this has resulted in a reduction in the economic activity, 74% through a decrease in public investment, and 60% through a lack of enterprise initiatives.

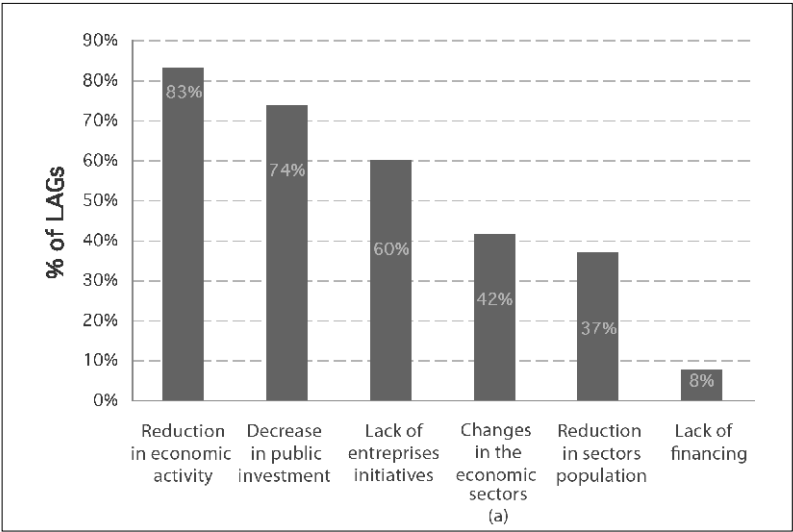
The other two obtained responses ("changes in the enterprise sectors, such as reduced activity in the industrial sector and increases in agricultural sector..." and "reduction in population") are chosen by 41% and 37% of the LAGs respectively. The first of these responses, far from overcoming the negative impact on resilience that scarce economic diversification in the rural environment can have, again highlights an increase of activity across the agricultural sector. The second response highlights the effects of the crisis on the loss of population, which corresponds to data from the National Statistics Institute (INE) (reduction of 2.06% in municipalities with less than 2,000 inhabitants, compared to an increase of 7.54% in the overall population of Spain, when comparing

averages between 2002-2007 and 2008-2013²). This population loss is another key factor that negatively impacts resilience of local communities in the rural environment.

Finally, one out of ten LAGs responded unprompted that one of the manifestation of the crisis is the lack of financing. This is consistent with some of the responses previously analysed. Even more, as the Figure 2 shows, in many cases several factors are mentioned which highlight the complexity of the economic crisis in the rural environment. Furthermore, when asked if the Administration's coordination has helped to overcome the challenges and changes in the rural environment during 2007-2013 (i.e. if it has helped to improve resilience in the face of the crisis during these years), 45% believe it has not, and only 26% believe it has.

Figure 2.

Responses to the question: How the crisis has manifested in the rural environment?



(a) i.e. reduced activity in the industrial sector and increases in agricultural sector

Source: LAGs survey, 2014

2• Percentages obtained from analysing data in the INE municipalities statistics (municipal registers) between 2002 and 2013.

Having done an approach to the manifestations of the economic crisis in the rural environment, we now look briefly at how this has affected the LAGs.

For all of LAGs but one, the economic crisis in the rural environment has affected the group, with three out of four saying it has completely affected them. However, the majority of the groups believe that they have been able to adapt to the situation, totally or partially.

This adaptation has meant that the LAGs have had to adjust internally, reduce their activity, or look for new sources of finance or niche activities. More than two thirds of LAGs have reduced operational costs (other than staff costs), and 48% have reduced staff costs. In addition, 20% (a much small percentage than the previous ones) have reduced their activity, which conveys the groups' decision to firstly reduce operational and structural costs, and secondly, reduce the group's activity.

From a more "expansive" point of view for adapting to the crisis, 58% of LAGs have looked for new sources of finance, and only two of those surveyed have responded (unprompted) that they have started new activities.

It is also worth to analysis the ways that the regional networks (which the LAGs form part of, and which are part of the LAGs external support) have adapted to the crisis. When asked if the networks have been capable of adapting to the situation, 55% agreed, and 45% partially agreed. These responses contrast those from the LAGs when asked the same question, exposing the less structured and weaker LAGs and the increased complexity of their work, which is made even more difficult during periods where there is a lack of resources.

The networks have overcome the crisis, reducing operational costs other than staff costs (two thirds of networks), reducing activity (half of them) and reducing their workforces (one third).

When asked if the networks have helped the LAGs to adapt to the new situation, four out of five responded that they had (or that they partially had), even though one of the mechanisms for overcoming the crisis was to reduce activity, whilst just one out of five said "no". Again, these results contrast with the responses from the LAGs, where only 14% agreed that they had received help from the network which they belong to. This difference could indicate the different perception with regards to the need for help, and the difficulties the LAGs had in carrying out their work during the crisis. It could be that this was not fully understood by the networks, which are more distanced from the realities facing the territory.

Third block: Have the LAGs already contributed to, or are they contributing to, the resilience of the rural environment? How are they doing this? By overcoming the social break-up, depopulation, environmental conservation and/or contributing to economic diversification? If this is the case, can the LAGs be the necessary actors to help resilience in the rural environment?

To enter the analysis of the contribution of LAGs to resilience, these were asked about their perception on the consideration from the administration in relation to the LEADER approach as an effective tool to solve the problems in the rural environment. Only 18 % answered positively. For 40 % of LAGs, the administration does not believe the LEADER approach as a mean to solve problems in rural areas, being only partially for the remainder respondents. These figures support the findings of Esparcia (2011: 311): "In the regional governments [...] there is lack of receptivity to the work of the LAGs and little will to take them into account to the implementation of sectoral policies in rural areas is detected".

Nevertheless, when asked about their perception on the consideration from the local communities in relation to the LEADER approach, more than two thirds responded that these consider useful the LEADER methodology (less than one third responded "partially", and only one LAG responded that local communities do not consider necessary the LEADER approach).

With regards to the networks, the responses were very similar, highlighting the positive perception on the consideration from local communities of the LEADER approach as a tool for solving problems in rural areas, compared to the negative perception on the consideration from the administration.

From these responses, the LAGs (using the LEADER approach), taking into account the perspective of the inhabitants of the rural municipalities, are considered as a good instrument to fight against the crisis in rural areas.

Thus, in the context of the economic crisis in the rural environment that has already been mentioned, and with the adjustments that have had to be made (both internally and in terms of their activity), more than two thirds of the LAGs have made a significant effort to do things differently than how they used to do them before the crisis, in order to respond in a better way to the new challenges, helping to improve resilience.

However, only some of the LAGs agree that they have reoriented their work as a result of the crisis. Specifically, 26% of those surveyed agreed. Amongst the different

ways of repurposing their work, the responses highlight training programmes, working with entrepreneurs and supporting agricultural food companies, in one out of three LAGs. For a very few respondents, consulting and training tasks are also mentioned as ways of reorienting their work.

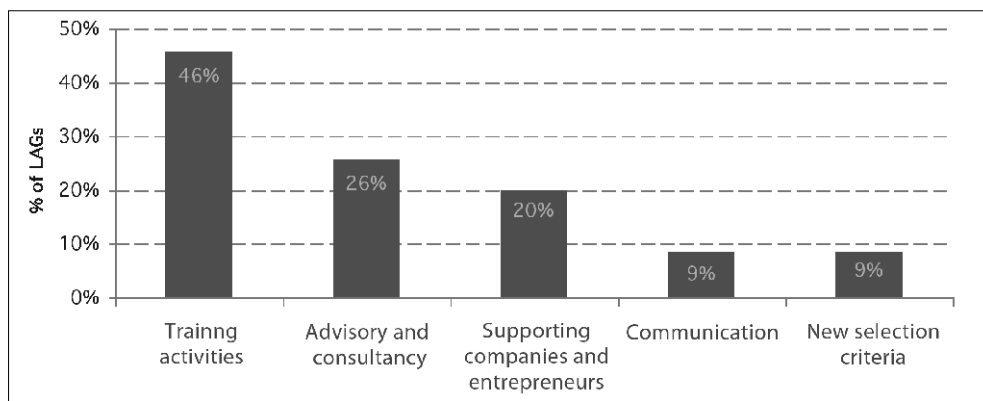
When asked what initiatives the group has implemented, the responses are very varied. They highlight two new types of activities over and above the rest. The main one is training (general training, employment training, training for entrepreneurs and training in new opportunities and innovation), as mentioned by 59% of responders. The second one, by a long way, is advice and consulting, mentioned by 19% of responders. These two areas confirm the importance that the LAGs have placed on factors aimed at generating employment and job seeking amongst the rural population, both of which cover the social and economic aspects of resilience.

From the other responses, it is worth mentioning the support provided to the agricultural sector (new crops and agricultural exploitation, enterprise incubators), which puts the focus back on the importance of the agricultural sector in adapting to the crisis. It is also worth mentioning a response relating to public-private support initiatives for sustainable development in the territory, in accordance with one of the key aspects for overcoming the threat to the resilience of the rural environment we have already mentioned.

A very interesting question with regards to improving resilience is the way in which the LAGs have been able to stimulate a change in mentality amongst the inhabitants of the rural environment, so that these rural areas can strengthen and come out of the economic crisis in a better position (see Figure 3). 54% of the LAGs agreed that the group had contributed to this change in mentality.

Figure 3.

What actions have the LAGs implemented to stimulate a change in mentality amongst the inhabitants of the rural environment?



Source: LAGs survey, 2014

The actions that the groups have implemented to drive this change in mentality have been mainly related to training and employment (self-employment, improving professional qualifications, training activity for entrepreneurs, opening new employment sites, pilot employment programmes, training workshops, increasing the entrepreneurial spirit, and raising awareness of the importance of education). Almost half of the LAGs that were involved in this change of mentality in the rural environment have highlighted these training activities, aimed at generating employment and improving professional skills amongst the rural environment's population. A quarter of the LAGs have also favoured consultancy and advisory activities. These percentages are similar to those reflected by the corresponding responses to the new initiatives implemented by the LAGs, which were previously analysed. This could suggest that, through these initiatives, the groups try to somehow support this change in mentality amongst the rural community.

There are also other relevant activities for changing mentality. These include securing funding for entrepreneurs and supporting companies (one fifth of the LAGs who have stated they contributed to the change in mentality), focusing on communication, as well as adapting the project selection criteria in their strategy to the new situation caused by the crisis (in both cases, a minority of LAGs mentioned this). The

last response is a specific way of adapting the LAGs' objectives to the crisis situation: new selection criteria in order to access new situations and new benefits, resulting from the crisis.

Finally, from the LAGs' perspective, only 5% believe that rural environment would be able to go back to the baseline following the economic crisis, for 38% the situation prior to the crisis can be partially restored, whilst for 57% it won't recover. These figures question the resilience in the rural environment, from an economic perspective.

By other hand, assuming that GDP per capita in the rural environment recovers after the crisis, one third of the LAGs believe that the situation, both social and environmental, will be worse than before the crisis. However, for these two factors (social and environmental), 38% and 46% of the LAGs, respectively, believe that once the crisis is over, the situation will be better than before. These are more encouraging percentages, but are based on the assumption that GDP per capita will recover.

Some conclusions and future prospects

The rural environment is a dynamic system that finds it difficult to adapt to the changes caused by the economic crisis. This is mainly due to its lack of social coordination, less economic activity and depopulation. Few organisations truly have a presence in the rural environment, which makes it difficult the existence of a strong social fabric. The LAGs, in many rural areas of Spain are perhaps the only ones who can try to cover this gap. As a result, they are some essential tools, not only as witnesses of these changes that are occurring in the rural environment, but also as entities that can change, adapt, and help the resilience of the rural territories in which they carry out their activities. The information coming from surveys with a high number of LAGs and most of the regional Rural Development Networks, certainly supports the evidence in this paper.

The current crisis is perceived by the LAGs primarily as an economic problem (unemployment, company problems, lack of finance), but with very sensitive effects on the territory in terms of social aspects (reduction in services) as well as population (decline in population). Paradoxically, this can have a slightly positive effect on the agricultural sector and food industry, leading to an increase in activity and employment, as a result of the effects of the crisis on other economic sectors.

The theoretical work of LAGs consists of applying the LEADER methodology or the "bottom-up" approach. This paper confirms that the population (guided by the main actors in the territory) adequately participates in the development of the territorial strategy, a basic element of planning rural policies in the area. However, there are limitations which make difficult this decision making model, especially when it comes to preparing the strategy and defining projects. These are faced with influences or interferences from the local or regional public administrations, as well as favouring political interests over those purely related to the territory. As a result, the LAGs face difficulties when it comes to correctly apply a "bottom-up" approach. Thus the results, and the effectiveness of the actions, are limited.

The crisis has had an important effect on the LAGs who have, however, been able to adapt by reducing operating costs and to a lesser extent reducing their activity. In order to adapt, they have relied on economic support, mainly from public administrations (paradoxically, the LAGs are based on them, but have to be independent of them when it comes to planning and decision making). In a few cases, they have also logistical support from the regional rural development networks. The networks have also adapted more easily to the crisis, although they have had to reduce their activity more than the LAGs, closer to the territory and more sensitive to its needs.

LAGs partially contribute to the resilience of the rural environment and have a fundamental role in the more economic and social aspects. They have made an additional effort with regards to this, reorganising themselves in some cases and putting forward new initiatives, specifically aimed at generating employment and economic activity in the rural environment. They also try to help with the change in mentality amongst the rural population and, in some cases, changing the selection criteria for projects in order to adapt to new circumstances.

LAGs' initiatives and activities also tend to help with resilience and overcome challenges, specifically economic difficulties and social break-up. This primarily involves supporting entrepreneurs and companies across the territory by stimulating training and employment. This can indirectly slow down depopulation and attract new inhabitants (for example, those coming to work in the agriculture and food industries).

Secondly, they may also contribute simply by their existence (their organisation and structure provides a form of support for the territory) and the involvement of the population in decision making.

However, they have had to reduce most of their activity due to cut-backs and the effort they have had to make in order to survive the crisis, reducing operational costs, types and/or number of activities.

With regards to overcoming the last key challenge facing resilience in the rural environment (the fact that the territory does not have involvement in decision making), the LAGs (using the LEADER methodology) could be the most appropriate way of achieving this. However, the excessive involvement of the public administration and its influence in decision making impede the LAG's current ability to achieve this purpose.

In summary, the LAGs' structure and work methodology could be very useful tools for contributing to resilience in the rural environment, specifically because of their ability to overcome two of the threats to this, social break-up and the lack of involvement amongst the local population in the policies that affect them. However, they face difficulties in doing so. Their ability to act is reduced, primarily because of the economic crisis, and secondly because of a crisis with the LEADER methodology itself, as a result of the excessive involvement from Administration. These two factors mean that the LAGs cannot sufficiently help with strategies dealing with resilience in the rural environment.

The launching and implementation of the European Rural Development Programming for 2014-2020 should act as a turning point to rethink the ways of working amongst the LAGs under the LEADER methodology, in order for a "bottom-up" approach to be truly applied in terms of decision making (in the way to better contribution to cope with the effects of the crisis and strengthen resilience in rural areas). However, the available information about the design of programming period 2014-2020 show that, in most of the cases, LAGs have not participated in the consultancy process to design the rural development programmes, and are not considered for the public administration as an appropriate tool to help the rural environment. This is not the perception of local communities, who do believe that LAGs are a good instrument for the development of rural areas. Hopefully, this support to the LEADER methodology could help LAGs to fulfil their roles and, in crisis situations, contribute to improve resilience in the rural environment.

Nevertheless the preparation of the Rural Development Programming for 2014-2020 is well underway and time is certainly a limiting to change the way of taking decisions in rural policies. In any case, from now until 2020, the participation of LAGs in the decision making process can be improved, particularly in monitoring and evaluation of rural development policy and, where appropriate, in modifying the rural development programmes and strategies of territorial development.

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